DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 045 RC 018 766

AUTHOR Cashel, Chris
TITLE The Cost of Becoming an Outdoor Instructor.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 6p.; In: Advancing the Profession. National Conference for Outdoor Leaders: Public, Commercial, and Nonprofit Partnerships in Outdoor Recreation. Conference Proceedings (2nd, Mt. Crested Butte, Colorado, September 26-28, 1991); see ED 360 108.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Certification; Costs; Leadership; *Leadership Training; *Outdoor Education; *Professional Training; *Trainers; Training Objectives
IDENTIFIERS National Outdoor Leadership School; *Outdoor Leadership; Outward Bound; Wilderness Education Association

ABSTRACT

This article describes instructor criteria in three outdoor organizations: Outward Bound (OB), the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), and the Wilderness Education Association (WEA). Common requirements for outdoor leadership programs are outdoor experience and skills, advanced first aid, CPR, and a minimum age requirement. Traditionally OB, NOLS, and WEA trained instructors in-house. Candidates purchased experiences and skills training by taking a series of courses leading to an assistantship in the field. The requirements for an Assistant Instructor for the Colorado Outward Bound Schools include extensive people skills as well as mountaineering skills and river running skills. The National Outdoor Leadership School looks for qualities such as an ability to recognize potential hazards and a commitment to develop technical skills in numerous outdoor activities. The cost of the course in 1990 was $1,950 for 34 days. In addition to standard age and first aid requirements, the Wilderness Education Association requires instructors to have a college degree, a current physical exam, evaluations which acknowledge abilities, and a recommendation of a head instructor. Courses cost about $600. It costs thousands of dollars and requires a long time in the field to develop into a truly great outdoor instructor. All three programs are beginning to look for alternative ways to discover qualified instructors and to accelerate them through the instructor process. (KS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 404 045

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Robin G. Cash
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

THE COST OF BECOMING AN OUTDOOR INSTRUCTOR

By

Chris Cashel
Associate Professor
Department of Leisure Sciences
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

About the author: Dr. Cashel is an Associate Professor of Leisure Sciences at Oklahoma State University. She has been an instructor for the Wilderness Education Association since 1984 and currently coordinates a joint program with the Boy Scouts of America at Philmont Scout Ranch. Her research interests revolve around leadership and effective teaching in the outdoors and, more recently, a study of participant mood states and personality during a short course experience.

Abstract: This article describes instructor criteria in three outdoor organizations: Outward Bound (OB), the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), and the Wilderness Education Association (WEA). The programs typically drew candidates from standard courses and offered instructor courses or an apprentice system to develop new instructors. Currently, all three programs are attracting potential employees who have extensive abilities and experience, but have not participated in a specific program. Finally, the article relates how the author became an instructor with the Wilderness Education Association and the costs associated with that choice of careers.

When first presented with this topic, I thought it would be a relatively simple process of totalling numbers and costs of programs. Upon reflection, the topic became cloudier and much larger. I will attempt to describe the past and current practices by large outdoor programs to develop instructor staff. There are exceptions and I think every instructor has arrived at his/her position by a different route. I am no exception.

Three large outdoor programs which hire and/or train instructor staff are Outward Bound (OB), the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and the Wilderness Education Association (WEA). There are hundreds of other organizations which hire staff and have specific criteria for employment. It is beyond the expectations of this presentation to cover all of them. Perhaps the common denominator is outdoor experience and skills, advanced first aid, CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), and a minimum age requirement. After technical and safety skills are mastered, varying degrees of organizational, teaching, and processing skills are desired.

People enter the outdoor field for many reasons and come from many backgrounds. Some want to live outdoors for a season, to have a free lifestyle, to share the pleasure of the mountains with others, to gain appreciation of the natural environment or to hone teaching skills. Higher levels of employment are usually available during the summer months, but programs have extended offerings to courses throughout the year in all types of terrain and climates.

During the 1960s interest in the outdoors increased and many programs hired college-age students to lead trips if they knew how to carry a pack or had been a scout. Some of these leaders were good, but most viewed their position as a summer job and a camp counselor attitude prevailed. Seasonal staff worked long hours for little pay at a job in which one was expected to

RC 018766

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

burn-out or outgrow in two or three seasons. Today, more undergraduates are specializing in outdoor education and anticipate working in the outdoors as a career. The aspirations of employees has caused some concern for organizations who now have a group who wants year-round work, health benefits, adequate living quarters, and a path to other career opportunities. Regardless of employee background and motivation, many employees leave the field after four or five years, and organizations can have turnovers of 25-100% each year.

Traditionally Outward Bound, NOLS, and WEA trained instructors in-house. Participants from standard programs were asked to apply or applied for consideration as instructors. Candidates purchased experiences and skills training by taking a series of courses leading up to an assistantship in the field. Through an apprentice-type system, one helped with courses until a time when an administrator determined he or she was prepared to lead or head instruct a course. The length of training varied for each individual and program. During this training period, a person would continue to develop outdoor technical skills, teaching abilities, listening skills, organizational abilities and would simply put in time to mature into a role. Sometimes an individual would pay for food and travel to course locations. Some received food and lodging and a small stipend as they built resumes. Each program developed its own criteria for instructors.

For example, the Colorado Outward Bound School requirements for an Assistant Instructor in 1990 were: (a) 21 years old; (b) current advanced first aid certification or first responder, EMT (Emergency Medical Technician) or WEC (Winter Emergency Care) and CPR; (c) excellent health and condition; (d) experience in teaching, counseling, natural sciences, special populations work, mountain/river guiding, group leadership, emergency medical care, wilderness expeditioning; (e) ability to listen, articulate ideas and teach effectively, to motivate others, to offer and receive feedback openly, and the ability to work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds; (f) mountaineering skills: including competence in backcountry map and compass navigation, familiarity with minimum impact practices for backcountry travel and living, at least 30 days of extended wilderness trips spanning at least two seasons (winter and summer); (g) climbing: familiarity with belay and rappel techniques, brake systems and cliff evacuations, knowledge of current clean climbing practices, ability to lead 5.6 standard or above comfortably, have led at least 10 multi-pitch 5th class climbs over the past two years; (h) alpine skills: familiarity with snow climbing techniques, use of ice axe and snow anchors, route finding ability in mixed terrain, off-trail, and five 4th class and five 5th class peak ascents spanning at least two seasons; and (i) river running (if applicable to program): 1000 whitewater miles (class III and above), the majority of it in rafts, commercial/group whitewater experiences, familiarity with water safety/emergency techniques. (Colorado Outward Bound School, 1990)

The standards are high and reflect a substantial investment of time, money, and energy for someone who comes into a system at an entry level. Requirements would be similar in other Outward Bound schools and would relate to specific skill specialties, i.e., canoeing in Minnesota, sailing in Maine. A higher level of competence in every area would be expected of head instructors.

The Kurt Hahn Leadership Center in North Carolina offers several specific instructor type courses. They are designed to help interested people break into outdoor education and to work on technical and teaching skills. One is designed specifically for teachers who are unavailable during the normal instructor program. They are attractive to persons who are looking for

summer employment with the North Carolina Outward Bound School or for those who want to build a good foundation of abilities. They range in length from seven days to two months and in cost from $385-$2900. The entry-level instructor practicum is open to anyone 18 years old, however, Outward Bound does not hire instructors under 21 years old. The Instructor Apprenticeship requires one to be 22 years old. Finally, the Center offers a staff training course for non Outward Bound graduates and for those who have extensive experience and skills. (North Carolina Outward Bound School, 1990)

In a 1989 study, Birmingham described that across all Outward Bound schools in the United States, 60% of instructors were male, 43% of all instructors were single, 64% were between 26 and 35 years old and 55% stated their primary career as outdoor adventure.

Likewise the National Outdoor Leadership School looks for special qualities. About 75% of instructors began as students on a NOLS course. The average age of an instructor is 29 and 31% are women. NOLS instructors are educators who meet the following criteria and can: (a) recognize and evaluate potential hazards in the outdoors and make sound judgments based on safety practices; (b) desire to be an outdoor educator with a flexible attitude in order to live, work, and live with students in the outdoors for extended periods of time; (c) commitment to develop technical skills such as climbing, mountaineering, whitewater and sea kayaking, sailing, caving, horsepacking, skiing, etc; (d) dedication to develop skills in communication, teaching, and leadership; and (e) extensive backcountry experience. (National Outdoor Leadership School, 1990)

NOLS offers many workshops and staff training opportunities to develop higher skilled instructors. In addition, NOLS offers an instructors course. It requires a prior NOLS course or one to be a qualified nongraduate. The participant must be at least 18 years old, have advanced first aid and CPR or first responder or EMT certification. The cost of the course in 1990 was $1950 and was 34 days long. This summer, NOLS experimented with a shorter instructor course for qualified individuals. Requirements included 100 weeks of prior outdoor teaching and evaluation of a resume.

The Wilderness Education Association also requires certain characteristics of instructors. Instructors must have completed an instructors course or a National Standard Program and meet the following criteria: (a) be at least 21 years old; (b) current in advanced first aid and CPR; (c) a college graduate or comparable experience (graduate degrees preferable); (d) a physical examination in the last year; (e) student evaluations which acknowledge abilities; and (f) a recommendation of a head instructor. (Wilderness Education Association, 1989)

Instructor courses are available about once a year and cost about $600. Despite the course, most candidates still fulfill an apprenticeship by assisting with one or more courses. An instructor maintains certification by maintaining membership in WEA, current first aid certifications, instructing a National Standard Program or Steward program every three years, showing proof of a physical examination within a 24-month period, and showing proof of continuing education in technical and process skills. The profile of instructors is different in WEA. Since it is a membership organization and many affiliates are colleges and universities, most instructors have advanced degrees and are over 30 years old. The gender breakdown is even. All instructors work on a part-time basis and support themselves in other jobs during the year.

Buell (1983) stated that after first aid and safety knowledge, leadership is the single most critical aspect of conducting outdoor programs. An instructor develops leadership skills over time and cannot be taught in one course. Therefore, all programs try to maintain a strong instructor staff over time. More mature and competent staff are vital as organizations grow and expand clientele. Ewert (1985) notes that programs for the mentally and physically disabled, chemically dependent persons and senior adults (over 50) will increase significantly by the year 2000. While providing more employment opportunities, instructors will need additional training for special populations. Regardless, instructor staff generally cannot work more than six months in the field and need to space out courses. Wages are on scales which do not step quickly. Ways to offer year-round employment, benefit packages and adequate housing are being developed within the agencies.

It costs thousands of dollars and months and years of time in the field to develop into a truly great outdoor instructor. That is without the costs of an undergraduate or graduate education which precedes or is gained while pursuing outdoor experiences. It costs many personal relationships since one is in the field for extended times. It costs thousands of dollars for equipment, gear, and clothing. Travel to remote places is costly. Most instructors earn $250-$500 a week in the field and work safely about six months a year. The investment for a poverty lifestyle may seem out of proportion, but there are many who understand the magic of bringing awareness and life into a group of nervous and unsure students. It is a pure and intense experience. It means something to all who are there. The rewards certainly are not monetary. They are sensory and personal and carry into everything else one does. It takes years to be ready to instruct. Maturity, enthusiasm, and skills need to be balanced within an individual. Just when one possesses such traits is when one might begin settling down in a relationship or with a career. Extended time in the field is not then as desirable.

Perhaps that is why all three programs are beginning to look for alternative ways to discover qualified instructors and to accelerate them through the instructor process. There is a recognition that finding experiences and mature instructors is more difficult, and those who qualify do not want nor intend to begin at the bottom. This is a refreshing and positive trend. Instructors may elevate incomes because their skills and experience count more. Looking toward second or third career people who bring extensive skills and other abilities is occurring in Outward Bound, NOLS, and WEA. By attracting more mature outdoor educators and eliminating some of the entry-level requirements, such as being a graduate of the program, organizations are tapping a new group of professionals. The trend also allows an instructor to work for more than one organization during the year. Alternative work assignments, varied length courses, housing, and benefits are helping to maintain these full-time workers.

My interest in outdoor instructing began as a student of Outward Bound. I attended a teachers' practicum in Maine and a year later participated in a Colorado Outward Bound standard program. I even travelled to Nepal with Outward Bound. Later I was a student on a WEA professionals' course. We were professionals because we worked full- time! I liked the curriculum and the way it was presented and applied to be an assistant instructor. After paying my airfare and for my food in the field, I was allowed to assist in the field and did so for six weeks of a semester-long course. It was an eye opening experience. I had never felt such responsibility for others even though I worked in student affairs at a major university. After this experience, I was given head instructor responsibilities. Because I had a full-time position, I could work during my five-week vacation each year. The situation became less than desirable

for me and coupled with some professional dilemmas, I switched tracks in higher education from administrator to faculty and could teach two or three programs a summer. I brought organizational skills, administrative abilities, teaching experience, a background in group dynamics and recreation, and appropriate jargon to the groups WEA worked with. I always had a co- or assistant instructor with technical expertise. The combination worked very well and allowed me to develop my technical skills. Most years I invested travel costs and living costs between courses in exchange to teach in the outdoors. The net monetary gain has been minimal, however, the experiences have helped me personally and professionally. It is why I still seek field time each year, albeit shorter times. The investment, if I include formal education, travel, medical costs, missed job opportunities because I was waiting for a course to fill, equipment, and salary difference in career paths, adds up to be very high. I have never really thought about it because I think the dividends on a personal level are worth it. I have friends and contacts across the country; I have found something that I am interested in pursuing on a scholarly basis; I have gone to unique parts of the world; and I think have served my students better because of my involvement. While not typical, it has been my path to becoming an outdoor instructor.

References

Birmingham, C. (1989). Factors effecting turnover and retention of outdoor adventure staff. Presentation at the Association for Experiential Education National Conference. Santa Fe, NM.

Buell, L. (1983). *Outdoor Leadership Competency: A Manual of Self Assessment and Staff Evaluation*. Greenfield, MA: Environmental Awareness Publications.

Colorado Outward Bound School. (1989). *Application for Assistant Instructor*. Denver, CO.

Ewert, A. (1985). Risk recreation: Trends and issues. *Trends*. Washington, DC: National Park Service.

National Outdoor Leadership School. (1990). *Catalog of Courses*. Lander, WY.

North Carolina Outward Bound School. (1990). *Kurt Hahn Leadership Center Course Catalog*. Hickory, NC.

Wilderness Education Association. (1989). *The WEA Affiliate Handbook*. Saranac Lake, NY.